



**Testimony of Patti Miller  
Vice President, Children Now**

**United States of House of Representatives  
Subcommittee on Telecommunications and the Internet  
Committee on Energy and Commerce  
“Images Kids See on the Screen”  
June 22, 2007**

Entertainment media play a powerful and ubiquitous role in the lives of our nation's children. Children spend more time engaging with media than they spend doing anything else except for sleeping.<sup>1</sup> For almost six and a half hours a day, they watch their favorite television shows, download content to their iPods, surf the Internet and play video games.<sup>2</sup> They look to media—in all its forms—for their role models, often imitating their favorite characters' style of dress, attitudes and behaviors.

Yet much of what children see in the media can have serious negative impacts on their physical health and well-being. For example, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, tobacco use in movies is a major factor in teen smoking.<sup>3</sup> The Institute of Medicine has concluded that exposure to smoking in movies is linked to more favorable attitudes toward smoking and characters who smoke and increases the risk that adolescents will initiate the behavior.<sup>4</sup>

In addition to smoking, there are two other media issues that pose significant health risks for our nation's youngest consumers of media: 1) media violence and; 2) the advertising and marketing of unhealthy foods and beverages.

### **Media Violence**

There is tremendous amount of violent content in the entertainment media that children consume. Based on the conclusions of hundreds of research studies, it is clear that children who are exposed to violent programming face a higher risk of suffering from harmful consequences<sup>5</sup> including a belief that it is acceptable to behave aggressively and violently, an increased desensitization towards violence in real life, a greater tendency for engaging in violent and aggressive behavior later in life and a heightened fear of becoming a victim of violence.<sup>6</sup>

Unfortunately, the existing media ratings systems for the television, video game and motion picture industries have not effectively helped parents discern what is appropriate and healthy entertainment. In order for media ratings to work well for parents, Children Now believes that the media industry should implement the following two recommendations:

---

<sup>1</sup>Kaiser Family Foundation, *Generation M: Media in the Lives of 8-18 Year-Olds*, (Menlo Park, CA, March 2005).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> "Smoke Free Movies: Problem: How Movies Sell Smoking,"

<http://www.smokefreemovies.ucsf.edu/problem/moviessell.html>. Last accessed June 19, 2007.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> § 551 (a) (4) "Studies have shown that children exposed to violent video programming at a young age have a higher tendency for violent and aggressive behavior later in life than children not so exposed, and that children exposed to violent video programming are prone to assume that acts of violence are acceptable behavior."

<sup>6</sup> Murray, J. P., "Television and Violence: Implications of the Surgeon General's Research Program," *American Psychologist* 28 (1973): pp. 472-478.

National Institute of Mental Health, *Television and Behavior: Ten Years of Scientific Progress and Implications for the Eighties, Volume 1* (Rockville, MD: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1982).

Kaiser Family Foundation, *National Television Violence Study, Volume 3* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc., 1998).

## **1) Provide parents with more accurate and descriptive content-based ratings;**

The media industry must apply the ratings in a reliable, consistent and accurate manner. There is significant concern about the accuracy of the TV ratings. For example, one study found that the content descriptor “V” for violence was not applied to all programs that included violent scenes. Of broadcast prime-time programs rated TV-G, a rating that does not receive content descriptors, almost one third (29%) contained violent content. Furthermore, of the TV-PG programs that received no “V” content descriptor, almost half (43%) contained violence, as did four out of five (79%) of programs rated TV-14 without a “V” designation.<sup>7</sup>

Further, while some parents are very concerned about violence, others are more concerned about sexual situations or suggestive dialogue. Children Now believes that content-based ratings are essential as they enable parents to make decisions about what their children see based upon their own values and preferences. Further, while the age-based ratings seem to be more recognizable to parents, those who have used ratings are twice as likely to say that content-based ratings offer more useful information as age-based ones.<sup>8</sup>

## **2) Increase public education efforts.**

Broadcasters need to do more to educate parents about the content-based ratings. While four out of five parents say they have heard of the TV ratings, most don’t understand what they mean. Only half of them (51%) know that “V” stands for violence, about a third (36%) know that S indicates a show has sexual content and only 2% know that “D” stands for suggestive dialogue. Further, only one in ten parents (11%) know that the FV rating indicates “fantasy violence” in children’s shows; almost an equal number of parents (9%) think that it stands for “family viewing.”<sup>9</sup>

Broadcasters must ensure that public education campaigns are ongoing, not cyclical, and that they focus on the content descriptors. Further, the media industry should find new ways to bring content ratings information to parents. For example, as television transitions from analog to digital, broadcasters should take advantage of emerging click-through, interactive technology to provide on-demand ratings information to parents. Parents should be able to click on a TV rating on the screen to find out what it means as well as more detailed information about why it received that particular content descriptor.

Children Now believes that by adopting these recommendations, the media industry would take a major step in ensuring that parents have the tools that they need to make informed choices about their children’s media consumption and decrease the need for regulatory action. Media ratings

---

<sup>7</sup> Kunkel, D., Farinola, W.J.M., Farrar, K., Donnerstein, E., Biely, E., and Zwarun, L., “Deciphering the V-chip: An Examination of the Television Industry’s Program Rating Judgments,” *Journal of Communication* 52 (March 2002): pp. 112-138.

<sup>8</sup> Kaiser Family Foundation, *Parents, Media and Public Policy: A Kaiser Family Foundation Survey*, (Menlo Park, CA, September, 2004).

<sup>9</sup> Kaiser Family Foundation, *Parents, Children & Media, A Kaiser Family Foundation Survey*, (Menlo Park, CA, June 2007).

systems can only be truly effective when parents know they are available, know how to use them, and believe that they provide accurate and descriptive content-based information.

### **Advertising and Marketing of Unhealthy Foods and Beverages to Children**

Finally, we must address the role of media in the childhood obesity epidemic, an unprecedented public health crisis. For the first time in modern history, we have a generation of children whose life expectancy may be lower than that of their parents because of childhood obesity.<sup>10</sup>

According to the National Center for Health Statistics, in the past three decades, there has been a 300 percent increase in the rate of U.S. children who are either overweight or obese.<sup>11</sup> The U.S. Surgeon General has identified overweight and obesity as “the fastest growing cause of disease and death in America.”<sup>12</sup>

While there is a confluence of factors that contribute to childhood obesity, advertising is clearly one of those factors, and a significant one at that. And it is a factor that we *must* address.

American companies spend \$15 billion a year on advertising and marketing to children under the age of 12—twice the amount they spent just 10 years ago.<sup>13</sup> Children are exposed to thousands of food ads each year on television alone, the majority of which are for candy and snacks (34%), cereal (28%) and fast foods (10%).<sup>14</sup> Only four percent of advertised foods are for dairy products, 1% is for fruit juices and none are for fruits and vegetables.<sup>15</sup> In addition, a recent Kaiser Family Foundation study found that 85% of the top food brands targeting kids on television also use branded websites to market to kids using a range of strategies including, advergames, viral marketing, sweepstakes, promotions, memberships and online television ads.<sup>16</sup>

So why does this matter? Research shows that young children are uniquely vulnerable to commercial persuasion. Children under the age of eight don’t recognize the persuasive intent of ads and tend to accept them as accurate and unbiased.<sup>17</sup> Children ages four and under cannot consistently discriminate between program content and advertising.<sup>18</sup> In fact, research shows that 30-second commercials influence food preferences in children as young as two years-old.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>10</sup> S. Jay Olshansky, et al, “A Potential Decline in Life Expectancy in the United States in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century,” *New England Journal of Medicine*: 352:11: 1138-1145.

<sup>11</sup> National Center for Health Statistics, “Prevalence of Overweight Children and Adolescents: United States, 1999-2002,” <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/products/pubs/pubd/hestats/overweight>.

<sup>12</sup> Richard H. Carmona, “The Obesity Crisis in America,” Testimony of the United States Surgeon General before the Subcommittee on Education Reform, Committee on Education and the Workforce, “United States House of Representatives, July 19, 2003. <http://www.surgeongeneral.gov/news/testimony/obesity07162003.html>.

<sup>13</sup> Jennifer Wolcott, “Hey Kid—You Wanna Buy A...”, *Christian Science Monitor* (April 28, 2004).

<sup>14</sup> Kaiser Family Foundation, *Food for Thought: Television Food Advertising in the United States*, (Menlo Park, CA., March 2007).

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Kaiser Family Foundation, *It’s Child Play: Advergames and the Online Marketing of Food to Children*, (Menlo Park, CA, July, 2006).

<sup>17</sup> Dale Kunkel, “Children and Television Advertising,” *Handbook of Children and the Media*, ed. Dorothy G. Singer and Jerome Singer (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publication, pp. 375-393).

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Dina Borzekowski and Thomas Robinson, “The 30 Second Effect: An Experiment Revealing the Impact of TV Commercials on the Food Preferences of Preschoolers,” *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*, (January, 2001) 1: 42-46.

Congress and the FCC have recognized children's vulnerability and has placed limits on the amount of advertising during children's programs and established rules about how children's favorite TV characters can be used to pitch products to them. But this is not enough to protect children from a food advertising environment that is currently skewed toward promoting unhealthy, non-nutritious food to the nation's youth.

In December 2005, the Institute of Medicine released a report that concluded that "food and beverage practices geared to kids are out of balance with healthful diets and contribute to an environment that puts children's health at risk."<sup>20</sup> The committee found strong, compelling evidence that television advertising influences the food and beverage preferences, purchase requests and consumption habits of children.

Children Now believes that in order to address the role of advertising and marketing in the childhood obesity epidemic, we must focus on and assure the implementation of two Institute of Medicine recommendations. The industry must:

- 1) Shift the balance of advertising and marketing targeted to kids to products and beverages that are lower in calories, fat, salt, and added sugars and higher in nutrient content;***
- 2) Assure that licensed characters are used only to promote foods and beverages that support healthful diets for children and youth.***<sup>21</sup>

Children Now is currently working with representatives from the media industry, food and beverage companies, advertising associations, and advocacy and public health organizations on the Task Force on Media and Childhood Obesity formed at the request of Senator Brownback, Senator Harkin, FCC Chairman Martin and FCC Commissioners Tate and Copps. The Task Force is currently engaged in substantive discussions and working on recommendations, with a final report scheduled for release this summer. It is our hope that the Task Force will achieve meaningful solutions to voluntarily address the advertising and marketing of unhealthy foods to children. However, if the Task Force is unable to address these issues voluntarily, we support the Institute of Medicine's recommendation that Congress intervene on behalf of the nation's children.

In conclusion, there is no question that the entertainment media plays an influential role in our children's healthy development. Let's work towards real, tangible solutions to improve the media environment in which they spend so much of their time. Our children's health depends on it.

---

<sup>20</sup> Institute of Medicine, Fact sheet from *Food Marketing to Children and Youth: Threat or Opportunity?*, December, 2006.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*